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ABSTRACT

The case study illustrated how the principles of the ecological paradigm guided the entry, assessment, design, implementation, and evaluation of three collaborative interventions in a rural Oregon high school. A core group of faculty and administration at the small high school serving 370 students in grades 8-12 requested four University of Oregon psychology graduate students to work with them to raise student self-esteem. In the entry and assessment phases, the graduate team established a working relationship with the core group and gained entry with resource people and social settings. A comprehensive longitudinal assessment of the community revealed that while teachers and students both had low self-esteem, both groups desired to change the school atmosphere. The core group and graduate students designed student activity clubs to provide more opportunities for students to develop personal competencies, a transition program to provide positive relationships between eighth graders and upperclassmen, and a teacher support group for promoting socializing and faculty peer support. After one year, the first two interventions were considered successful and continued. The third was considered unsuccessful because it increased divisiveness among the faculty. Paradigm principles which influenced the intervention are discussed. (SB)

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Community interventions in rural areas pose particularly taxing problems for the typically urban-oriented psychologist. The values and assumptions of the researcher and the host setting will almost inevitably diverge; there is usually strong wariness on the part of the rural community towards an "expert outsider," and perhaps unrealistically high expectations on both sides as to what can be accomplished. In this case study, the ecological paradigm's principles and guidelines (Trickett, Kelly & Vincent, 1983) are illustrated by a community psychology graduate student team's experience in the entry, assessment, and collaborative relationship with a rural high school faculty, culminating in the design and implementation of three interventions.

Entry

"Milltown" High School (a fictitious name) has a student population of 370, grades 8--12, and serves the logging community of "Milltown," Oregon (population 3,700) as well as the surrounding area. Contact was initiated in the fall of 1979 by a teacher who wrote to the University of Oregon Department of Psychology, requesting help in "raising student self-esteem." The letter was referred to the Social Adaptation class, a year-long graduate course-practicum in community psychology. Four class members constituted the team which responded.

A visit to the high school revealed a core group of eight faculty and two administrators who had been meeting periodically for two months to discuss and

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formulate plans; however, they felt they were making little progress. Symptoms of low student self-esteem they described included interpersonal hostility and aggression, low academic motivation, low post-graduate aspirations and in general, a low level of initiative. In addition, other phenomenon such as lack of communication and support between school staff, and over-critical attitudes towards the students amongst the faculty, were hinted at. During this initial contact the team noted that a key resource person was the principal, whose sanction was necessary for the team to continue even tentative explorations of a collaborative relationship with the school.

At this early point in the intervention, the ecological paradigm was already guiding the process of entry and assessment. Specifically, principle I states "Persons, settings and events are resources for the development of the research setting and the research relationship," and principle VIII, "Community research and research relationships between investigator and community are designed to be coupled with the host environment." In accordance with these prescripts, the team's task was to establish a collaborative relationship with identified resource groups and persons in the host setting and to do so in a way that was acceptable and natural--organic to--the setting of the high school. By starting out with resources and work methods that are respected and integral to the host setting, the seeds of ownership for a project would be planted.

The team had already identified the principal as a key resource. In a lengthy meeting with him the team listened to his concerns about the team's potential involvement, his goals for the school, and what he felt an intervention should involve. He stressed, and the team agreed, that ideas for change should come from his staff and not be transplanted from another school; he also emphasized he did not want students "used as guinea pigs." He was particularly skeptical of the team's university affiliation, and in general of helping agents which came from outside of Milltown.

The school district lacked the funds for "frills" and a common problem they had experienced was starting programs with federal grants, only to have the money withdrawn or greatly reduced. There had been trouble getting school levies passed in recent years because of the local timber-dependent, depressed economy, and the community was carefully scrutinizing the way the existing budget was being spent. The interventions would thus have to be economically modest, generated from resources the school already had.

In response to the principal's concerns the team emphasized that their philosophy was to work collaboratively with him and his staff and that any intervention designed would essentially be coming from school members' ideas. A few days after this meeting the principal agreed to the team's continued involvement. In turn, the team requested that they continue to meet with him on an ongoing periodic basis to maintain open communication.

Assessment

Now that official sanction had been given, the team struggled with the three-fold task of establishing a productive working relationship with the core group, gaining entry with many resource persons and social settings, and doing a comprehensive, longitudinal assessment of Milltown High and the community. The latter undertaking is dictated by principle VII, "Persons, settings and events are assessed over time."

The team began meeting with the core group regularly, to interview its members individually, and to interview other faculty. The team also talked with a cross section of students (from various socioeconomic groups, academic ability levels, and social cliques). In each case, the team asked setting members to focus on both what was valued about the high school and community, and what changes were desired. Specifically, individuals, groups, and social settings which were admired or appreciated were asked about; and team members explained their philosophy that a useful strategy for solving problems was to ascertain

what is considered positive and increase it, rather than focussing exclusively on the negative.

In interviews, the team carefully inquired into the important roles played by setting members, as they were discovered. For example, many of the teachers were coaches for school teams; these activities were asked about. How did the teacher build morale and team spirit? How did he or she feel about this year's team? Similarly, students' activities in drama, the school paper, and more informal pursuits were explored. Interviewees were asked about particularly important school events, for example, a one-time exchange program for science students between Milltown High and a Utah high school. How had this project developed? Who had been instrumental, in what way?

In addition to interviews, assessment included perusing archival data, such as census reports, newspaper articles, school yearbooks, and teacher and student handbooks. The goal was to get an overview of the recent history of the area, and to identify additional interview questions and leads for observational data collection. For example, it was discovered that the area had a very high unemployment rate, 10 percent of the population, and in interviews much anxiety was expressed by teachers and students alike about this. Teachers in particular felt guilty about the bleak future students faced in Milltown; they also voiced reluctance to urge students to abandon the town, since they did have pride in the community. The team would try to discover how the setting members coped with this problem, which was obviously of pressing concern.

Observational assessment included participant-observation in a variety of formal and informal social settings. Team members spent time in classes at all grade levels, had lunch in the school cafeteria with students, socialized with teachers in the faculty lounge, and "hung out" with students before school in the halls. The team also attended a varsity basketball game and accompanied students and faculty to the local pizza parlor afterwards.

Participant-observation yielded several important findings. First, there was high visibility of setting members in the school and in the community, not surprising in a small town. Second, members tended to take on multiple roles across social settings because these settings tended to be undermanned (Barker & Gump, 1964). Third, there was seen to be a lack of overt coping behaviors with respect to the community's unemployment problem and the students' uncertain future. A minority of students planned to go to college, and teachers encouraged this, but no discussion or advice-giving was observed about the future for the majority. In their public behavior, teachers and students kept up a "business as usual" front, while privately they felt anxious and guilty about the lack of preparation for the students' future. Those observations would be a key to the formulation of the interventions.

In addition to these activities, about midway through the entry-assessment period the team gave a presentation to the core group on the psychological research about adolescent self-esteem and techniques for raising it. This was designed to achieve the following goals: (1) reduce the ambiguity of the relationship between the team and the host setting members, (2) establish the team's expertise in the area of adolescent self-esteem, (3) build a common knowledge base from which to work, and (4) create an atmosphere for problem solving. At subsequent meetings the team helped faculty members identify the specific student behaviors which would indicate high self-esteem. The team also helped the faculty identify factors in the school which either helped or discouraged the expression of these behaviors.

Feedback to Faculty Core Group

The entry-assessment process culminated in a report by the team to the core group and principal. This session was an important opportunity for group recognition of the resources at Milltown High, which setting members had mostly been confiding individually. The team communicated its impressions that the school had many positive aspects, including basically good relations between faculty and

students; a student body which was willing to buy into extra-curricular activities as a means of expressing their interests; a good curriculum, a dedicated, sensitive staff, and a pleasant, well-kept building and grounds. The team also noted that, whereas low self-esteem behaviors had been observed, they were not seen as a serious problem and that there was a lot of impetus among both students and faculty to change the social atmosphere of the school.

Thus far, in the assessment-entry process several important principles of the ecological paradigm had been brought to bear. The team had demonstrated that they were able and willing to work collaboratively, in a way defined as useful by the host setting (principle VIII). A shift in focus, from deficits to the identification of resources and desirable behavior, had been introduced (principle I). The team was helping the setting members create a self-consciousness about resource management (principle II) by discussing valued aspects of the school in a recognized social setting, the core group. After two months of entry-assessment the stage for designing the interventions was set.

Problem-Solving

The problem-solving stage of intervention design began by the core group deciding on three major objectives they wished to achieve: (1) more opportunities for the students to develop and receive recognition for personal competences; (2) more positive interpersonal relations between upperclassmen and the low-status eighth-graders; and (3) opportunities for communication and social support between faculty members. The core group and the team then divided into three action groups, each focussed on one of these objectives. What resulted was actually three interventions, each in answer primarily to one of the objectives, and each targetting a different sub-population in the high school.

The criteria for the choice of interventions was guided by principles II and IV of the ecological paradigm. Specifically, the team wished to ensure the conservation and the development of the setting's own self-defined resources, and

linked with this was the recognition that adaptation of the existing social settings was needed in order to allow for growth and change of school members. Both students and faculty expressed the desire for additional social situations in which to share activities and to express and receive appreciation for each other. By this time, the faculty were openly acknowledging that they had low self-esteem themselves and wanted to address this in the intervention.

The team's formulation of the situation contained both ecological and intrapsychic components. Low self-esteem was seen to initially stem from the poor prospects for the future of the youth of Milltown, and more importantly, from the lack of appropriate coping responses available to either teachers or students. There was little or nothing the high school members could do to improve the local economy, and by the norms of the community, discussing it openly was taboo. The teachers, as adult community members, felt that they were letting the students down. The students did not want to acknowledge the disappointment they felt in the community. The inability to discuss the problem had led to its internalization in the form of self-blame. A vicious circle had begun: Low acceptance of self was linked to low acceptance of others (Kaplan & Pokorney, 1970), which led to low expectations of others and to a lack of recognition being expressed. Lack of recognition from significant others led to continued low self-esteem of setting members, and so forth. Coping efforts were misguided into finding someone to fault--in this case, by labeling students as having low self-esteem. The team saw this as a case of blaming the victim (Ryan, 1970).

However, calling attention to the unexpressed anxiety and guilt over community unemployment was clearly not going to interrupt this vicious circle. The faculty had already acknowledged that they themselves had low self-esteem, which the team felt was sufficient insight. What was needed was a way of channeling setting members' anxiety into coping behaviors that would be efficacious. Thus, in working with the core group, the team focussed entirely on developing the

resources of the setting in order to create long-term preventive impact on the school and community.

Together with the core group, a more limited formulation of the situation was identified, focussing on the vicious circle without the hypothesized initiating event of the community's poor economy. The interventions designed developed from this reframe of the situation. Specifically, the high school members were seen as needing vehicles--settings and sanctioned situations--in which they could demonstrate varied competences and give each other recognition and support.

In the design of interventions, the natural resources of the setting were emphasized: students' appreciation of extra-curricular activities; their willingness to look to teachers as role models; the diversity of activities and roles setting members enjoyed in the community; the high visibility of setting members which should lead to increased recognition for competences; the willingness of setting members to express more appreciation for each other.

The Interventions

The largest of the three interventions, Student Activity Clubs, targetted the entire student body and involved the faculty as well. Students had expressed a need for opportunities to develop personal competences outside of academia, and to have more structured situations to be with other students who shared their interests. After-school time was not available to them as many were bussed in from surrounding countryside. Fortuitously, a "float schedule" was planned for the following academic year, which freed two hours a week. The principal suggested one period be devoted to the proposed clubs. After establishing the parameters of activities possible with the administration, and obtaining from faculty the types of activities they would be willing to sponsor, the entire student body was polled to determine which of these clubs they would like. Pre-registration for clubs was held at the end of the spring semester. Some of the clubs which were started were guitar club, art club, community service club, and

ski club.

The second intervention targetted the incoming eighth graders, who had repeatedly been identified as a low status group in the school, vulnerable to culture shock as they entered the high school, and to upper class harassment. The middle school from which they came was a smaller, more protective type of environment. The necessity of having eighth graders in the high school was dictated by the physical size of the two schools. The Eighth Grade Transition Program was a two-pronged intervention. In the spring before leaving the middle school, eighth graders were given a slide show and talk prepared by high school juniors and seniors, about what to expect in high school. Secondly, each incoming eighth grader was paired with a volunteer upper class guide to familiarize him or her with the school and its culture in the fall. The guide system was designed to sensitize the older students to the eighth graders' needs and problems. A counselor who worked half-time in both schools coordinated the program.

The third intervention was the Teacher Support Group, whose purpose was to create settings to promote informal socializing and peer support in the faculty. The teacher support group began implementation of their plans with a before-school brunch, which was well-received. Other plans included potlucks, interfaculty sports, and a faculty phone and address directory. It was hoped that the opportunities for social support among the teachers would mediate the stress they reported.

Paradigm's Influence in Design and Implementation

Principle IX "A priority is given to attending to side effects" was an important influence in planning. The three interventions were seen as separate but complementary because of the hope-for side effects of each. Students were the main beneficiaries of the clubs, but teachers would hopefully gain recognition for demonstrating competences previously unacknowledged. Besides benefitting themselves from an orientation to the high school, eighth graders would provide

upperclassmen with increased recognition. Teachers would gain peer recognition from each other, and also hopefully from the principal, now that they had publicly stated they felt a need for more support.

Potential negative side effects were also anticipated. For example, it was thought that the Teacher Support Group might lead the principal to feel threatened. To address this, the team recommended that administrators be invited to all functions formally planned by the group.

In collaboratively designing and implementing the interventions, principle III, "Activating qualities of persons, settings and events are highlighted," guided the process. Principle III directed the team to engage the energies of the school's most proactive members in the interventions, to seek out existing settings and events which were open to becoming involved. For example, polling the student body about their preferred activity clubs was undertaken by students in the Milltown High psychology class, under the supervision of their teacher who was a member of the core group. The students viewed it as an interesting applied project and greatly enjoyed their role in the advance planning for the activity clubs. Another example was the new counselor who was half time and felt somewhat marginal in both the high school and middle school. He viewed the job of coordinator for the Transition Program as an opportunity to establish his role.

Finally, principles II (conservation of resources) and VIII (coupling of the research with the host environment) directed the team to give attention to the process by which the intervention could be sustained over time. This was done by linking each component of the interventions to as great an extent as possible to the already accepted system of doing things, and by building in recognition from the principal for the contribution of the core group teachers for their role in designing and implementing the interventions. The anticipation and planning for negative side effects was also a way to avoid early termination of the interventions.

Follow-up

The initial results of the implementation were assessed twelve months post-design, after they had been in effect for one academic year. Information was obtained by talking to students, teachers, and the principal, and by observation of events over the course of this year by team members who continued to work at Milltown High on a separate project.

Student Activity Groups had been well-received by the student body, and students reported that being able to pursue common interests with peers did help them feel better about themselves. Some of the clubs were more successful than others in encouraging and allowing for the demonstration of competences, depending on the commitment of the individual teacher to the encouragement of students taking leadership roles. A negative side effect was that a few teachers did not like the added role of club advisor. However, on the whole the school seemed satisfied with this intervention and planned to continue it the following year.

The Eighth Grade Transition Program was also implemented successfully. According to the counselor who was in charge of the program, and to the principal, there was less harassment of eighth graders, and they were having far fewer social difficulties than in previous years. This program was slated to continue and expand the following year. No negative side effects were reported.

The Teacher Support Group's outcome, in contrast, was disturbing. The group had started with a series of well-attended brunches and potlucks, many in individual teachers' homes. Unfortunately, gradually only a certain clique of teachers (a group of the younger faculty) remained involved. Other teachers reported that those not present, including the principal, were being criticized. They therefore did not want to be associated with the clique. Instead of encouraging cohesion, this intervention was increasing divisiveness among the faculty; the principal's authority was also being questioned, an anticipated negative side effect.

In retrospect, it is noted that the teachers on the subcommittee who developed

the Teacher Support Group were close friends to start with. If the subcommittee had included a cross section of the faculty, the disintegration of the support group might have been avoided. Also, it was felt by the team that the faculty had not followed the advice to involve the administrators in their activities. In contrast to the other interventions, which were owned and recognized by the school, this one had drifted quickly into the status of an outside-of-school activity.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how the ecological paradigm can guide entry, assessment, conceptualization and collaborative intervention design and implementation in a rural high school which initially had strong reservations about working with urban academicians. Two of three interventions were adopted successfully by the host setting. The ecological paradigm provides valuable insight into the third intervention's lack of success.

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